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ABSTRACT

Given that the task of freshman composition is to initiate students into the multidisciplinary academic discourse community, English teachers can speed up the novice's introduction more effectively than can specialists in those disciplines by having students observe, analyze, and produce the salient features of a discourse community's "dialect." A freshman writing course, designed to provide an understanding of the discourse conventions of various disciplines, had students perform the following activities: (1) read expert discourse from different disciplines and analyze them according to invention, arrangement and style; (2) contrast these texts to distinguish the methods, formats, and styles of different disciplines; (3) connect differences between each discipline's conventions and its assumptions about the origin and nature of knowledge; and (4) write simple papers such as might come out of a few of those disciplines. In one assignment, students sought to understand how much knowledge originates and is transmitted in sociology; they designed a questionnaire, conducted the survey in groups, and wrote a report using the structure, tone, and style of good sociological writing. To evaluate the effectiveness of a nonsociologist teaching that discipline's discourse conventions, the teacher's ranking of student papers was compared with that of a professional sociologist. The resulting Spearman rank correlation of .83 (out of a possible 1.0) suggests that learning how discourse features form out of a discipline's methods and epistemological assumptions is an effective strategy for producing the discourse of a discipline. (JG)

Relationships Between Expert and Novice Performance in Disciplinary Writing and Reading

by

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Relationships Between Expert and Novice
Performance in Disciplinary Writing and Reading

One of the most fruitful ideas to emerge in composition teaching in recent years is the notion of discourse communities. Some rhetoricians (e.g., Bizzell and Bartholomae) have argued persuasively that the mission of freshman composition should be to initiate students into the academic discourse community. But if one tries to carry out that mission, one quickly realizes that the university is composed not of one but of many discourse communities, each with its characteristic methods of inquiry, its own kind of resulting knowledge, its own genres or formats for representing and transmitting that knowledge, and its preferred styles of writing. For example, even within the social sciences, which might at first be thought of as comprising one discourse community, there is a range of methodologies from the most rigorously quantitative to the most individually qualitative; these methodologies result in knowledge that is represented in very different kinds of written reports--from demographic studies with numerous tables and charts accompanied by rather dry prose to ethnographies such as Clifford Geertz's, noted both for their perceptiveness of observation and their lyric beauty of style.

Initiating students into this one discourse community alone would require a great deal of time and effort; add to that the numerous other discourse communities at the university, and you have a formidable task if you hope to help students achieve any level of expertise in the writing of academic disciplines. Obviously, it is a task that English departments alone cannot

accomplish. In fact, some critics say English teachers have no business trying to teach students to write for any discourse communities except the ones inhabited by literary critics or E. B. White-style essayists. To teach students about the writing of any other discourse community, they say, is to teach a mere "service course." Let each discipline teach its own students how to write, they tell us.

My reply to this charge is that English teachers may be better suited to the task of introducing students to the discourse of other academic disciplines than the expert practitioners of the discipline are--provided the English teachers are willing to consider that discourse on its own terms and not as a degraded or inferior species of writing that needs to be regenerated. Consider with me for a moment that the discourse of any discipline is something like a regional dialect, say the unique dialect of Texas. If you were to move to Texas from Pennsylvania and you wanted to be taken for a native Texan, so that you wouldn't have to suffer the aspersions frequently cast on Yankees, you might try to master the Texas dialect. If you tried to do this, you would fare well or ill depending on the natural ability of your ear and tongue to master the pronunciations, rhythms, vocabulary items, and so on that all make up the dialect. And, of course, it would take time to acquire the dialect simply through trial and error. You might speed up the process, however, by asking a linguist who has studied the dialect to teach you what she knows. The linguist herself might not be a native Texan, but because she has been

trained to observe, analyze, and explain the features of dialects, she is probably a better teacher than most natives would be, since their own speech is to them something so familiar, something they are so enveloped in, that they cannot step back from it, observe it, and talk about it in terms that might help an outsider to master it. The natives know an outsider when they hear one, but I'll bet most of them wouldn't know how to teach the outsider the dialect by any means but imitation. Imitation is a time-honored method, it's true, but it's slow and only as good as the native abilities of master and pupil.

Admittedly, my analogy oversimplifies things somewhat, but consider that expert members of an academic discourse community are like the native speakers of a dialect. The experts' written discourse is marked by many features that identify them as expert. But their ways of writing are so familiar, so natural to them that sometimes the experts, like the native speakers, can't really tell the novice <u>how</u> to write--except to do as they do. Thus, becoming an expert in the writing of an academic discipline usually requires something like an apprenticeship (see Steven Toulmin and Walter Weimer on this point), in which the novice, over a period of time, gradually masters the discourse features that mark him as an expert. Can this process be hastened? Obviously I think so. I think that an English teacher, like my hypothetical linguist, can speed up the novice's acquisition of the "dialect" of a discourse community by observing, analyzing, and teaching its salient features. Let me explain how by

referring first to what others have said and then to a simple experiment of my own.

In the December 1986 issue of CCC, Leslie Moore and Linda Peterson describe a freshman writing course at Yale in which they taught students to analyze discourse conventions in non-literary texts from art history, anthropology, biology, literature, history, and philosophy. They claim that they were then able to help students write "authentic texts of their own" (467) for disciplines other than English, even though they as teachers were not experts in these other disciplines. Such an accomplishment is possible, Moore and Peterson say, "for if English faculty cannot bring a knowledge of the content . . . of various disciplines to the composition classroom, they can bring something else that is essential: an understanding of how conventions operate in a piece of written discourse" (466-7). For the different kinds of discourse they analyzed, they always asked the same questions about structure, style, strategies for presenting evidence, and the kinds of evidence allowed or disallowed. They also asked colleagues in other departments for help in devising assignments, and they invited a few of these professors to lecture to the class about how their discipline's discourse conventions shape their ideas as well as their prose.

Moore and Peterson's approach rests on the belief that conventions are not superficial, but rather are intimately linked to the epistemological assumptions of the discipline, i.e., to its assumptions about the origin and nature of knowledge. I completely agree with this belief, since in my dissertation I

explore the connections between epistemology and rhetoric in three research reports from the social sciences. Since last fall I have also been teaching a course similar to Moore and Peterson's, in which I try to make students aware of how thinking, reading, and writing are related in a number of academic disciplines including English literary study. My students and I read expert discourse from different disciplines and analyze it using the classical offices of rhetoric--invention, arrangement, and style. I define invention rather broadly to include the application of various research methods which all generate data to be reported in writing. Thus, we contrast texts that were invented by different methods--by library research, by interviews, by observations, by experiments, and so on. We contrast how different disciplines organize data in their reports--whether they use highly standardized formats with routine headings or whether they allow writers more freedom in imposing an organization on the material. And we contrast the styles of various disciplines' texts--whether they seem subjective or objective, formal or informal, dry and boring or alive and inviting--and we talk about <u>why</u> the style might be the way it is because of the discipline's assumptions about the origin and nature of knowledge.

Not only do the students read and analyze different disciplines' discourse, but they also attempt to write simple papers such as might come out of a few of those disciplines. One assignment I have used three times now calls on the students to think and write like survey sociologists. Now, when I tell some

of my colleagues in English that I am trying to get my students to write like sociologists, they reply--half in jest, half in horror--"Why would anyone want to?" This reply betrays the widely held belief that conventions are merely superficial; it betrays the attitude that the inelegant style of some--but not all--sociologists' writing is just the evidence we need to say it's not worthwhile to learn the other conventions of sociological writing. But such an attitude also says it's not worthwhile to understand the epistemology that informs sociological writing, that it's not worthwhile to bother to communicate with sociologists.

Believing that it is worthwhile for students to understand how much knowledge originates and is transmitted in sociology, I assign my students to design a questionnaire about some important issue on campus and survey a limited number of their fellow students. Prior to carrying out the survey we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this method of gaining knowledge, and I give my students the benefit of my limited expertise in questionnaire design and administration. Students collaborate on this assignment in groups of four or five; this collaboration has the advantage of helping them design a more complete, less ambiguous questionnaire and of giving them a bigger set of data to draw conclusions from. It also gives them the experience of working, as many academic writers do, in teams. I look over each questionnaire before it is duplicated and handed out on campus. When the surveying is completed, the students tabulate the data, analyze it, and begin to draw conclusions. Then they write the

report, attempting to use the structure, tone, and style of good sociological writing.

Now these questions naturally arise: How well can a non-sociologist like me teach other non-sociologists like my students to create knowledge and then represent it in a written text the way a sociologist would? How well can I, an admitted non-expert, assess whether or not my students have achieved that aim? Can I read sociological writing as a sociologist would? To check myself both as teacher and evaluator, earlier this semester I asked a professional sociologist to evaluate my students' reports. His instructions were simply to rank the ten papers from "most expert" to "least expert" based on his judgment of three factors: soundness of research, credibility of claims argued for, and quality of writing. Independently of him, I ranked them the same way and then met with him later to discuss our evaluations. His ranking is compared to mine in Figure 1.

As you can see, the papers are identified by letters; the sociologist's rankings are in the first column of numbers: and mine, in the second. Four of the rankings were essentially the same. The sociologist considered papers A and F a tie for the most expert, whereas I considered them first and second; we agreed on the least expert paper, paper E, and on the middle one, paper I. Comparing the other rankings, you will see that our rankings vary by one, two, or three. Papers C and G show the greatest disparity in ranking, and the discussion we had reveals why. Paper G, which I ranked fourth and he ranked seventh, was a survey on smokers' and non-smokers' behaviors and attitudes. The

results of the survey were very surprising to me: the students found that smoking behavior doesn't split right down the middle between smokers and non-smokers; there is a third group of what might be called occasional or social smokers, and this group allies itself much more with non-smokers in its attitudes and beliefs about the harmfulness of smoking, the wisdom of current movements to protect the rights of non-smokers, and so on. The students also found that smokers exhibit some interesting patterns of cognitive dissonance in the ways they indicated their agreement or disagreement with statements on the attitude part of the survey. I found these results very insightful and new, but to my surprise the sociologist found them all obvious and old hat. The difference is that he has read a lot of survey research on smoking and I have not, so the paper didn't have the same "surprise value" for the two of us. Part of being an expert in a discipline obviously includes knowledge of the existing literature.

On paper C, which he ranked third and I ranked sixth, the difference resulted from his being impressed with the methodological sophistication of the students' questionnaire and my being unimpressed with a fair number of poorly constructed sentences reporting comparative percentages. I did realize the students' questionnaire was more ambitious and better constructed than some of the others, but I thought that stylistic infelicities too frequently interfered with their reporting of otherwise significant findings. This is not to suggest that the sociologist was oblivious to stylistic problems in the writing; I

found him to be not at all like the stereotypical sociologist English teachers imagine with such horror--enamored of long, complex sentences cast in passive voice, and so on. As we compared comments and markings on the style of the papers, time after time we had noted the same problems. But on paper C he was more willing to forgive the style problems because he thought its authors were thinking much more like sociologists than many of the other students. The sociologist's attitude toward this paper may suggest why expert sociologists are more tolerant of what English teachers condemn as bad style: the sociologists are better able to appreciate what is said in spite of how it may be written. (The sociologist in this study remarked, however, that it would be much more pleasant to read the research in his field if more sociologists tried harder to use a clear and simple style.)

I haven't time to explain all of the differences in our rankings, but I would like to note that in spite of the differences, the overall Spearman rank correlation between our two orderings of the papers was .83. A perfect correlation would be 1.0, so a correlation of .83 is markedly better than that which would be due to chance. I don't wish to generalize too grandly from this small study, since it is based on just two people's rankings of ten papers for one discourse community. But I think the results do suggest that if an English teacher is willing to invest time to study the features of another discipline's discourse and to understand how those features grow out of the discipline's methods and epistemological assumptions,

then that English teacher can at least introduce students to the discourse community of the discipline. Moreover, the sociologist assured me he didn't think I was presuming to encroach on his territory; in fact, he welcomed this attempt to associate writing with sociological inquiry and reasoning, saying that too often students come to sociology courses knowing only how to write about books and their own experiences.

I can imagine that some people would mutter, "Well, of course he welcomes this--you're teaching a service course for sociology." But I beg to differ. Students are the ones being served here, because the course as I teach it includes much more than sociological thinking and writing; it attempts to give general strategies for analyzing and producing the discourse of any discipline. The premise of this whole endeavor is that reading and writing are fundamental to the work of the academy. It is through reading and writing that the members of the academy carry on the various conversations that, in effect, define the disciplines. If students are to be able to enter intelligently into these conversations with some degree of ease and speed, someone has to help them see how the conversations differ from one another. And since the conversations are nearly all conducted in English--just in different dialects, as it were--doesn't it make sense that that someone be an English teacher? I think we have always sensed that our discipline is at the heart and the base of university studies. We can make it even moreso by being willing to expand our area of expertise to include the analysis and production of all kinds of written texts.

FIGURE 1

PAPER	SOCIOLOGIST'S RANKING	ENGLISH TEACHER'S RANKING
A	1.5	1
B	9	7
C	3	6
D	8	9
E	10	10
F	1.5	2
G	7	4
H	4	3
I	5	5
J	6	8

Spearman rank correlation co-efficient = .83

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